

### Low Back Pain Topics

- ▼ Lower Back Pain
- ▶ Lower Back Pain Overview
- ▶ Low Back Pain Treatment
- ▶ Back Pain Overview
- ▶ Lower Back Pain Videos
- ▶ Low Back Pain Doctor Advice
- ▶ Lower Back Pain Forum
- ▶ La Lumbalgia en Español

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## Spondylosis: What It Actually Means

Spondylosis refers to degeneration of the spine. The term can be used to describe degeneration in the:

- Neck – called [cervical spondylosis](#)
- Lower back – called lumbar spondylosis
- Middle back – called thoracic spondylosis



Most often, the term spondylosis is used to describe [osteoarthritis of the spine](#), but it is also commonly used to describe any manner of spinal degeneration.

### Spondylosis is not a Clinical Diagnosis

As with many other terms to describe spinal problems, spondylosis is more of a descriptive term than it is a diagnosis. Literally it can be translated to mean that one has both pain and spine degeneration, regardless of what is causing the pain or where the degeneration is occurring.

Article continues below

For example:

- The patient may have pain from [facet joint osteoarthritis](#), causing pain during times of high activity or after extended inactivity
- There could be [spinal stenosis](#), an abnormal narrowing of the spinal canal, which is creating leg pain when the patient walks
- The pain could be caused by [degenerative disc disease](#), in which a degenerated disc that becomes dehydrated and loses some of its function, causing low back pain or neck pain, and possibly leg pain or arm pain.

These examples are only a few of the many possible contributors to a patient's pain.

After arriving at a confirmed *clinical diagnosis for the cause of a patient's pain* (rather than just the finding that there is spondylosis, which may or may not be causing the pain), physicians then usually use more specific terms for the diagnosis (such as [osteoarthritis](#), [lumbar degenerative disc disease](#) or [cervical degenerative disc disease](#), or [lumbar spinal stenosis](#) or [cervical spinal stenosis](#)) because those terms more effectively describe what is causing the pain.

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- [Spondylosis: What It Actually Means](#)
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## Spondylosis Questions

In order to better focus their back pain treatment, patients who have been told they have spondylosis should ask their treating physician several questions for clarification about which part of the spine is degenerating. For example:

If it is degeneration in the facet joints, then it is likely to be osteoarthritis.

- See [Osteoarthritis of the Spine](#).

If it is degeneration of the discs, it is likely to be degenerative disc disease.

- See [What is Degenerative Disc Disease?](#)

Patients should also ask whether or not any related conditions, such as [spinal stenosis](#), require attention. If a person can get these questions answered, he or she is likely to have a better idea of what is causing the pain and thus is more likely to find effective treatments.

Finally, patients who have evidence of spondylosis on an MRI or a CT scan should not assume that their pain is being caused by the degeneration. Spinal degeneration is a natural part of aging, and the patient's pain may or may not be caused by it.

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